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THE GROWTH OF THE CLASSICAL IN WORDSWORTH'S POETRY

The essentially romantic character of Wordsworth's early poetry no one is likely to dispute. In his preface to the edition of 1800 he declared himself a rebel to the school of Pope by announcing his principles, which are romantic to the core. Every article in his pronouncement is straight defiance to the authority and creed of the dying classicism. His "principal object," he says, "was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate them, throughout, as far as was possible, in a selection of language really used by men and, at the same time, to throw over them a colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect; and, further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature: chiefly, as far as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement." This marks a great advance upon the sacred doctrine of Pope that—

True Wit is Nature to advantage dress'd,
What oft was thought, but ne'er so well express'd.

In his early poems, that is, in all those of the volume of 1800 Wordsworth is more concerned about the appeal to the imagination than about perfection of form, more about emotion and sensation than about thought, more about suggestion than about full and clear expression, more about the individual than about the typical and the universal, and more about the concrete than about the general,—in other words, more about the romantic than about the classical. Illustrations abound in which the poet seeks to do no more than to lift the veil for the instant to show to the vision of imagination what lies beyond. In the words of Professor Page, whose distinction between the classical and the romantic I have made free use of in this connection, we get glimpses of "beauty relative and transient, with the charm, suggestiveness, and poignancy of its very incompleteness."

And these glimpses are set in contrast to the labored operations of the intellect and the results of reason. The poet makes a sharp contrast between reason and emotion; the former he reduces to the cold, unimaginative product of the mind entirely divorced from the fellowship of the affections. The philosopher in *A Poet's Epitaph* is one who "would peep and botanize upon his mother's grave"; the moralist is "a reasoning, self-sufficing thing, an intellectual All-in-all." But the poet of the poem is a mere child of nature, who—

Murmurs near the running brooks
A music sweeter than their own.

Similarly, in his lines *To My Sister*, he declares that a moment spent in communion with Nature may "give us more than years of toiling reason." Law springs from the heart, and love becomes the guiding principle of conduct. And in *The Tables Turned*—

One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can.

Science, art, intellect, those watchwords of the literary age just passed, are barren in comparison with the sweet lore which Nature brings, in other words, with emotion and imagination, the watchwords of the new age. The Lucy poems are but momentary revelations of the poet's soul, mere fragments from his dream of human life; *Lucy Gray* is but a suggestion of tragedy that has become etherealized into folklore; *Ruth* is an instance of the mysterious workings of Nature, both dangerous and beneficent, upon the human soul, as they are conceived by the poetic imagination. In none of these is there any thought of the reasoned completeness that marks the classical spirit. Nor is *Tintern Abbey* any less romantic, though it treats of philosophical truth in its relation to the poet's spiritual development. It penetrates into the supersensuous world that there it might catch a fleeting glimpse of the divine forces in Nature working upon the human soul. The poem has the superb lift of the imagination, not the calm assurance of tried and indisputable truth. Its truth is of the emotions, not of reason.

The province of the romantic Wordsworth finds not in the supernatural, as Coleridge did, but in the human mind,—

not chaos, not
The darkest pits of lowest Erebus,
Nor aught of blinder vacancy, scooped out
By help of dreams—can breed such fear and awe
As falls upon us often when we look
Into our Minds, into the Mind of Man—
My haunt, and the main region of my song.

To him Paradise and groves Elysian, Fortunate Fields become a “simple produce of the common day”; not that they become common but that the common things are transfigured in the glamor of romance, for over them is thrown the coloring of imagination. Michael is accordingly almost as romantic a figure as the Ancient Mariner. He lives in the world of imagination as well as in that of common fact; he hears the wind make subterraneous music; he receives from his boy feelings and emanations; he has for the hills a pleasurable feeling of blind love. He does not dwell on the heights controlling his emotions as would a classical hero. He betrays to his wife and his son the disturbance of his soul when there is the greatest need of concealment. When the crash comes and he has nothing to live for, he finds comfort in the strength of love, not in any reasoned system of philosophy or in the calm assurance of moral or intellectual self-sufficiency. He does not despair, or curse God and die, like the Byronic hero, but none the less is he the romantic hero, for many and many a day he went to the sheep-fold,—

And never lifted up a single stone.

Two years later we begin to notice a new element creeping into Wordsworth's poetry, at first almost negligible but destined later to be dominant both in his thought and in his style. It appears first as something to be striven after, and it is impersonate not in the poet or his representative in the special poem but in someone who has attained peace and whom the poet would fain imitate. It is the classical ideal, of a loftier type than that followed by the school of Pope; it is marked by sincerity in thought and dignity in style. It develops regularly with Wordsworth's years till it reaches its finest expression in

the poems which he wrote directly under the influence of the classics, especially of Vergil, in what has been called the Indian Summer of his poetic productivity. And its development is so gradual that the romantic character of the poems which first show its presence is hardly affected.

The first poem in which this new element may be detected is *Resolution and Independence* (1802). The Leech-gatherer is a man from an even humbler rank of life than Michael, and in some respects similar to him. They are men of no mean intellectual powers, and in the face of what the world would call misfortune they neither rebel nor complain. Like Michael the Leech-gatherer has been presented with such art that he is one of the great figures in Wordsworth's gallery of immortals. Unlike Michael's his character is hit off by a most effective contrast; the poet of the story is the direct opposite, and it is he and not the Leech-gatherer that is the purely romantic figure. One cannot but notice also the romantic character of the setting of the poem,—the freshness and, as it were, the buoyancy of nature,—and of the mood of the poet,—his emotional excitement, his uncontrolled passions, his fears and fancies, his dim sadness and blind thoughts. To the poet the old man whom he meets upon the lonely moor is the embodiment of perpetual calm. He is like a huge stone sometimes seen to lie couched on the bald top of an eminence, or like a sea-beast crawled forth, that on a shelf of rock or sand reposeth there to sun itself. He stood motionless like a cloud—

That heareth not the loud winds when they call
And moveth all together, if it move at all.

When, too, the old man begins to speak, he fulfils the promise of his appearance; his utterance is lofty, in choice words and measured phrase, and it reveals so firm a mind that the poet declares,—

“God,” said I, “be my help and stay secure;
I'll think of the Leech-gatherer on the lonely moor.”

He moves familiarly and serenely in a world hitherto wholly unknown to the poet who engages him in conversation. It is not the calm of dulness or indifference or despair; nor is it the apparent tranquillity of Michael, whose sole support under the

burden of sorrow is the strength of love. His peace is bred of his firm mind and as such is strictly classical, in striking contrast to the romantic excitement of his interlocutor. Note how complete is his self-possession, with what perfection he has mastered life. Wordsworth emphasizes his stately utterance, his cheerful contentment, his kind demeanor, as if to show that his calm was bred of high intelligence and law of reason. It is worlds removed from that of the "self-sufficing thing, an intellectual All-in-all" of the earlier poem, for his reason is not the hard, cold workings of the intellect alone, but the perfected product of a rich experience. Reason will become more and more glorified in Wordsworth's eyes, so that it will represent for him the classical ideal of the complete life. But still the poem represents the striving of incompleteness towards completeness, and in so far its temper is romantic.

Still more striking is the contrast between the striving on the one hand and the attainment on the other as shown in the *Ode to Duty* (1805), written three years later. The poet has lived a life of self-indulgence, of unchartered freedom, of chance desires; now he wishes a repose that ever is the same. And this rests on the eternal law of reason and is realized in the perfect beauty and order seen in the flowers, the stars, and the most ancient heavens. The purely romantic ideal,—

When love is an unerring light
And joy its own security,—

when imagination rather than reason is the guide, he puts aside as impossible in our present imperfect state and supplicates for the control of duty. In this he has a sense of completeness, of power, and of calm:—

Thou, who art victory and law,
When empty terrors overawe;
From vain temptations dost set free;
And calm'st the weary strife of frail humanity.

Imperfection is striving towards perfection; excitement is giving way to repose.

But mere tranquillity is not an ideal, else the calm of the earlier scene depicted in the *Elegiac Stanzas* (1805) would not

have been set aside as based only on a half-truth. In his callow days he would have seen in the quietude of the sea about Peele Castle "the soul of truth in every part," but now, because a deep distress has humanized his soul, he sees truth only in the "lightning, the fierce wind, and trampling waves." And here one would say that the poet was a true romanticist, for the storm symbolizes emotion, excitement, sensation, rather than harmony and completeness. And the scene corresponds, for nowhere does Wordsworth more effectively express poignancy and passionateness than in the stanza:—

O 'tis a passionate work!—yet wise and well,
Well chosen is the spirit that is here;
That hulk that labours in the deadly swell,
This rueful sky, this pageantry of fear!

It is not so much the storm, however, that interests Wordsworth, as the castle that is resisting it. The castle is here a symbol of the classical temper in that standing there sublime, it braves,—

Cased in the unfeeling armour of old time,
The lightning, the fierce wind, the trampling waves.

Translated into human experience this becomes "fortitude, and patient cheer" rising superior to the vicissitudes of life. Such calm comes through much tribulation, not through the happy accident of the absence of storm.

The same idea, that peace can be realized only through struggle, is developed in the *Character of the Happy Warrior* (1806). He is attaining that perfection indicated in the *Ode to Duty*, for he turns his necessity to glorious gain, and he is more able to endure,—

As more exposed to suffering and distress.

Like Paul, the Happy Warrior does not boast as though he had already attained, either were already perfect, but he follows after,—

Who, not content that former worth hold fast,
Looks forward, persevering to the last,
From well to better, daily self-surpast.

Perfection is in his vision; he depends upon the law of reason as upon the best of friends. Even in the heat of conflict he keeps

the law in calmness made, and sees what he foresaw. In some respects he has attained, for he is at peace with his own conscience; the judgment of the world is a matter of indifference to him, since he has the confidence of Heaven's applause. Thus it is that when the mortal mist is gathering, he can rest in the eventual element of calm.

In *Laodamia* (1814) we have presented more sharply than in any of the poems we have been considering the clash between the romantic and the classical. Here it is not, as in some of the other poems, a contrast between the striving towards perfection and its realization, but a bitter antagonism which persists till the death of the romantic protagonist. It is significant, too, that the classical protagonist attains "absolute and finished beauty," not in this life but only in the world beyond. This fact gives the measure of the difference between the classical ideal of Wordsworth and the pseudo-classical standards of the school of Pope. Protesilaus is far more typically classical than the Leech-gatherer or the Happy Warrior, and the ideal state he depicts is far more fully developed than is that of the *Ode to Duty*. Perfection can be revealed in its fullness only by one who has risen from the dead. In this heaven, which he strives to depict to his wife, reason governs all things, but it is reason wedded to Elysian beauty. The heroic arts of earth are "with finer harmony pursued" in a region of "more pellucid streams, an ampler ether, a diviner air, and fields invested with purpureal gleams." Here perfection is realized in beauty, in virtue, in thought, in act, and in the annihilation of self. The temporal has given way to the eternal, the individual to the type. Here there is no more struggle, no more striving towards the unattainable. A man's grasp at last equals his reach. This is the classical ideal, as of a Greek temple or a Sophoclean tragedy.

But the poem is called not after Protesilaus but after his wife, Laodamia, and it would thus seem that Wordsworth was more interested in her than in her husband. She is the opposite of Protesilaus in all respects; she is the romantic as he is the classical type. In the very first stanza her words betray her temper; her yearning affections reach out for more than they can grasp;

And while Protesilaus delivers his grave discourse, she listens charmed by his voice but heedless of his message. When accordingly Hermes reappears, "aloud she shrieked," and since she cannot hold the dear shade, she falls on the palace-floor a lifeless corse. The final judgment of the gods has to do with her doom in the next world, of which there are three versions given in successive editions of the poem. The first judgment is complete forgiveness; the second doomed her "to wander in a grosser clime apart from happy ghosts;" and the third ordered her to "wear out her appointed time apart from happy ghosts." In the second version Wordsworth passed severe judgment upon romantic excess; in the third he modified the severity of his sentence; but he never returned to the first forgiveness.

It is significant of Wordsworth's progress towards the classical ideal that the first version, that of 1814, should manifest sympathy with abandonment to passion, and that the poet should consider Laodamia's deep love "in reason's spite" sufficient to save her from any penalty at the hands of the gods. Their point of view he judged was not that of mortals, and Laodamia could not comprehend it even though expounded by her husband who had risen from the dead. We do not wonder that the Wordsworth of this year should be loth to condemn a wife whose chief crime was an unreasoning love for her husband. Romance had not yet lost its appeal to his sympathies. But in 1827 its glamor had become dim, and the relentless demands of law could not be set aside because of weak pity. A sin had been committed "in Reason's spite," and it must be avenged; hence the condemnation to a grosser clime. The version of 1832 softened down the harshness of the second sentence by changing the unlimited wandering in a grosser clime to a sort of purgatorial penance through her appointed time.

Dion, written in the same year as the first version of *Laodamia* and under the same influences, shows an equally inflexible regard for law and metes out severe judgment to him who overleaps its bounds. The hero had aspired to divinity,—

Not on the breath of popular applause,
But through dependence on the sacred laws
Framed in the schools where Wisdom dwelt retired,

Intent to trace the ideal path of right
 (More fair than heaven's broad causeway paved with stars)
 Which Dion learned to measure with sublime delight.

But he had unjustly shed blood, though for the public good, and he must pay the penalty of death. The moral of the story stated explicitly in the closing lines,—

Him only pleasure leads, and peace attends,
 Him, only him, the shield of Jove defends,
 Whose means are fair and spotless as his ends,—

shows how exalted this ideal was in Wordsworth's eyes. It must extend to the farthest action, not merely be a matter of belief. So in this poem as ultimately in *Laodamia* law and reason prevail over pity, and the classical conception of right prevails over romantic emotionalism.

Several events in Wordsworth's life may account for his gradual change from the romantic to the classical temper of his poetry. The emergence of Napoleon put an end to all hopes in the Revolution as the agent of liberty. The threat of invasion (October, 1803) united all England. Wordsworth has given glorious expression to his own feelings in his "Poems Dedicated to National Independence and Liberty." He calls upon his countrymen to—

Save this honoured Land from every Lord
 But British reason and the British sword.

So, too, the revolt of the Spaniards against Napoleon (1808) stirred England profoundly, as Wordsworth shows most eloquently in his pamphlet, "The Convention of Cintra," and in his patriotic sonnets. "By the soul only the nations shall be great and free, and this greatness and freedom come only through obedience to divine law":—

Though Nature's dread protection fails,
 There is a bulwark in the soul. This knew
 Iberian Burghers when the sword they drew
 In Saragoza, naked to the gales
 Of fiercely-breathing war.

Another event much more personal in character and in many ways more thoroughgoing in its influence upon the poet's thought was his brother John's death by drowning in 1805.

This deep distress humanized his soul more than any other calamity in his life. It did not drive him into revolt, but it cast him more than ever upon "the great Cause and Ruler of things." Strength and power came to him as from the source of all law; he submitted to a new control. Religion, in other words, is taking the place formerly held by nature. So it is that when he writes *The White Doe of Rylstone* (1807-8), he almost wholly avoids the romantic manner of Scott, though the story and the metre might well be Scott's, and he uses the narrative merely as a vehicle for his philosophy of suffering. Of the maiden he says:—

Her soul doth in itself stand fast,
Sustained by memory of the past
And strength of Reason; held above
The infirmities of mortal love;
Undaunted, lofty, calm, and stable,
And awfully impenetrable.

The last influence to be considered in this connection is a purely literary one, Wordsworth's re-reading Vergil with his son. This is seen in the particularly classical tone of *Laodamia* and *Dion*, in the perfection of the diction and the solemnity of the thought.

The development of Wordsworth's style follows the same course as his thought. The difference between the earlier and the later verse has been fully recognized, though not so much from the point of view we have been considering. Hutton in his essay on "Wordsworth's Two Styles" remarks that in the earlier pieces "emotion is uniformly suggested rather than expressed, or . . . expressed by reticence, by the jealous parsimony of a half-voluntary, half-involuntary reserve." In the later poems, on the other hand, "emotion is much more freely, frankly, and tenderly expressed, so that there is often in it a richness and mellowness of effect quite foreign to Wordsworth's earlier mood." This is almost a repetition of what was said about the thought of the poems, that suggestion in the earlier ones gives way to clear and full expression in the later, effectiveness to completeness. Thus in one of the Lucy poems the lines,—

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;

Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees,—

contain the barest suggestion of emotion in contrast with the richness of expression in the wonderful stanza in the *Extempore Effusion upon the Death of James Hogg*,—

Like clouds that rake the mountain summits,
Or waves that own no curbing hand,
How fast has brother followed brother
From sunshine to the sunless land !

The lilt of the verse of the earlier poetry has in the later yielded to graver and more solemn sound, as one may see by comparing the three Yarrow poems:—

"Oh ! green," said I, "are Yarrow holms,
And sweet is Yarrow flowing !
Fair hangs the apple frae the rock,
But we will leave it growing.
O'er hilly path, and open Strath,
We'll wander Scotland thorough ;
But, though so near, we will not turn
Into the dale of Yarrow."

How different is this movement from that of the second poem:—

A blue sky bends o'er Yarrow vale,
Save where that pearly whiteness
Is round the rising sun diffused,
A tender, hazy brightness ;
Mild dew of promise ! that excludes
All profitless dejection ;
Though not unwilling here to admit
A pensive recollection.

The later poems are all stateliness and dignity, the earlier all buoyancy and sprightliness. Notice, too, the emphasis laid on the "deep and solemn harmony" of the fine late poem, *Composed upon an Evening of Extraordinary Splendour and Beauty*, a harmony which is as marked in the rhythm as in the content of the poem, and which is as peculiar of the classical style as the melody, heard, for instance, in the great *Ode*, is of the romantic. In the latter the verse is almost that of the dance; in the former it is that of the solemn processional. This harmony first appears in its exquisite loveliness in the closing stanzas of *Brougham Castle*, especially the wonderful one:—

Love had he found in huts where poor men lie ;
His daily teachers had been woods and rills,
The silence that is in the lonely sky,
The sleep that is among the lonely hills.

It is found in all its beauty in *Laodamia*:—

Of all that is most beauteous — imaged there
In happier beauty ; more pellucid streams,
An ampler ether, a diviner air,
And fields invested with purpureal gleams ;
Climes which the sun, who sheds the brightest day
Earth knows, is all unworthy to survey.

The romantic in Wordsworth does not take the form of unbounded luxuriance of ornament as it does in the youthful Shelley and Keats, but it does delight in a rich playfulness of fancy which touches upon many beautiful details of description without dwelling upon them. There is no sense of overloading, never any hot-house growth. One gets an impression of an immense store of beauty, of which only a few specimens are shown and only for a moment. In the later poems the details are not so numerous, but they are worked out at greater length and with more delicate finish. One does not get the same sense of beauty in reserve and waiting to be developed. Thus in the two poems, *Beggars* and its *Sequel*, one composed in 1802, the other in 1817, we have an illustration of this difference. In the former a few well-chosen details give a vivid impression of the joyousness of the season and also of the beggars, in contrast to the comparative soberness of the more elaborated description of the latter. In the earlier poetry the meanest flower that blows can give thoughts that too often lie too deep for tears, but they are left unexpressed; in the *Primrose of the Rock* (1831) the flower furnishes a complete homily, beautifully conceived but without much imaginative reach. Like Greek architecture, and therefore true to the classical ideal, Wordsworth's later verse does not carry the mind into the illimitable. It is more concerned to show beauty in its perfection, as under the control of divine, immutable laws than, as his earlier verse did, to suggest beauty all the more wonderful because it transcends the power of the human mind to grasp it in its completeness. Perfection of form has become of greater consequence than sheer imagination.

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